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De Kooning, O'Hara, Prynne: Towards a Poetics of Paint

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In May 1995, the British poet J.H. Prynne was invited to speak at a symposium on the work of the Dutch American painter Willem de Kooning, held at the Tate Gallery in London.¹ The event was organized to coincide with the exhibition of a number of works on loan from a major retrospective at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, DC and Prynne took as his subject de Kooning's 1963 oil painting *Rosy-Fingered Dawn at Louse Point*, an 80- by 70-inch canvas featuring broad strokes in a palette of blue, green, pink and grey pastel colours, with bolder yellow shapes at its centre. The lion's share of Prynne's lecture, which was published the following year, is concerned with the formal properties of the painting itself — its materials, its size, the tension it establishes between portrait and landscape format — and with decisions about gesture and colour which help to create a specific effect. He takes a dialectical approach, putting forward two contradictory 'readings' of the painting in order to arrive at a final sublation, an assessment of de Kooning's work as a virtuoso artistic achievement which manages simultaneously to acknowledge and to contain the conditions of its own production, thereby reaching a new status as 'an autonomous free painterly image, emerging like the birth of Venus from the foam-like clouds of a contested sky'.²

The specifics of Prynne's interpretation will be considered in more detail below — what is important for the moment is his setting forth, in the final stages of the lecture, of a theory linking de Kooning's painting with Frank O'Hara's 1957 poem 'Ode to Willem de Kooning'. Having discussed the well-established references to de Kooning's *Gotham News* (1955) and *Easter Monday* (1955–56) in the poem's 15th line ('while our days tumble and rant through Gotham and Easter narrows'),³ as well as a more contentious reference to Jackson Pollock's *White Light* (1954)

¹ Grateful acknowledgment is given to Gonville and Caius College, Cambridge for funding a research trip to the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam; to Jed Birmingham for providing digital scans of *Mademoiselle's* January 1960 issue; and to the organisers of Writing Into Art, a conference at the University of Strathclyde where a version of this paper was read in June 2013.

² J.H. Prynne, 'A Discourse on Willem de Kooning's *Rosy-Fingered Dawn at Louse Point*', *act*, 2 (1996), 34–73 (p. 50). Subsequent references to this lecture are given inline.

³ Frank O'Hara, 'Ode to Willem de Kooning', in *The Collected Poems of Frank O'Hara*, ed. by Donald Allen (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1971) pp. 283–85.

and *Scent* (1955) put forward by Anthony Libby,⁴ Prynne takes this linkage between paintings and poem one step further, reading a pair of lines from the poem's second section — 'In the dawn as in the first | it's the Homeric rose, its scent' — as 'a distinct reference to both the title and the theme of *Rosy-Fingered Dawn*'. As he points out, this 'can only be prescience if the datings of the picture to 1963 and the poem to 1957 are both secure'; but he pushes on, arguing that 'there is a temptation to pause over a possibly reverse influence — that O'Hara's speculative description may have triggered de Kooning into the conception of his painting, completed four years after the poem was published' (p. 48).

Prynne's theory remains tentative, and he ultimately lays it aside: 'O'Hara's penchant for a personalised dialectic has led me, temporarily, to assent to a somewhat anecdote-based account of the colour values in de Kooning's picture. My concluding position must reject this personalised aspect' (p. 50). Still, he spends the best part of three pages, plus endnotes, discussing it in detail, mustering biographical evidence to support the idea of a connection. In what follows, I would like to explore this suggestion further, presenting some additional evidence to support Prynne's hypothesis before moving on to consider it on a more theoretical level, using the semiotic system of Michael Riffaterre as a point of entry. I will not look at either work from a conventionally direct interpretive perspective, but will instead use apparently supplementary or contextual elements — the poem's physical history and the painting's title — to help trace out a new model of influence, aiming to sidestep the sort of uncritical art-historical discourse that Norman Bryson has termed 'the leisure sector of intellectual life'.⁵

According to Donald Allen's notes on the poem in his monumental collected edition, 'Ode to Willem de Kooning' was written in 1957.⁶ This date is taken from a March 1959 letter from O'Hara, now in the collection of Allen's papers at the University of Connecticut. For some reason, Allen's papers also include two separate typescripts of the poem, while most other works are present only once.⁷ The poem was first printed in 1959 in *A New Folder*, an anthology edited by Daisy Aldan and published as what Ian Patterson terms a coda to the little magazine *Folder*, which

⁴ Anthony Libby, 'O'Hara on the Silver Range', *Contemporary Literature*, 17 (1976), pp. 240–62 (p. 262).

⁵ Norman Bryson, *Vision and Painting: The Logic of the Gaze* (London: Macmillan, 1983), p. xi.

⁶ Allen, p. 540.

⁷ Alexander Smith, *Frank O'Hara: A Comprehensive Bibliography* (New York: Garland, 1976), p. 264.

ran between 1953 and 1955.⁸ Michael Hennessy has argued that, despite its relative obscurity today, *A New Folder* served a crucial role in the definition of American poetry at the turn of the '60s, 'sketch[ing] out a blueprint for Allen's [*The New American Poetry*] and in some ways even supersed[ing] his achievement'.⁹ The book shares sixteen of its poets with Allen's famous volume, and also features work by almost thirty visual artists, including two drawings by de Kooning. *A New Folder* was reprinted in paperback in 1960, and 'Ode to Willem de Kooning' was published again the following year in *Odes*, a collection of O'Hara's odes alongside prints by Michael Goldberg. Part of a series of printed collaborations between poets and artists — the other duets comprise John Ashbery and Joan Mitchell, Kenneth Koch and Alfred Leslie, and James Schuyler and Grace Hartigan¹⁰ — *Odes* was succeeded, after O'Hara's death, by *In Memory of My Feelings*, a 1967 memorial collection featuring a number of his poems with specially commissioned illustrations. *Odes* was reprinted in 1969, and Allen's collected edition appeared in 1971, in the wake of which 'Ode to Willem de Kooning' has been printed in too many locations to list, though it has never been one of O'Hara's most popular poems.

This brief textual history offers a number of points before 1963 at which de Kooning may have come into contact with the poem. First and foremost is the possibility that he saw it in manuscript or typescript in the period between its reported composition in 1957 and its first publication in 1959. It is tempting to use the presence of two typescripts at the University of Connecticut to support this theory, suggesting that the poem was disseminated relatively early, but this is much more likely to be the result of Allen's later editorial work. Still, that O'Hara would at some point have shown the poem to its subject, a close friend (according to Brad Gooch, 'de Kooning often greeted O'Hara at the Cedar [Tavern] with a big juicy kiss')¹¹ is hardly a wild supposition. Lytle Shaw asserts that '[de] Kooning was definitely a reader of O'Hara's work', and even refers to Prynne's lecture;¹² he confirms that he is 'pretty sure he [i.e. de Kooning] did see ['Ode to Willem de Kooning'] relatively early' (email to the author, 6 November 2012). It certainly

⁸ Ian Patterson, 'New York Poets: *Folder* (1953–6); *Neon* (1954–60); and *Yugen* (1958–62)', in *The Oxford Critical and Cultural History of Modernist Magazines*, 3 vols (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009–2013), ed. by Peter Brooker and Andrew Thacker, I, pp. 983–1000 (p. 985)

⁹ Michael Hennessy, 'On Daisy Aldan, "A New Folder"', *Jacket2* <<https://jacket2.org/article/daisy-aldan-new-folder>> [accessed 24 November 2012] (para. 1 of 7).

¹⁰ Smith, p. 21.

¹¹ Brad Gooch, *City Poet: The Life and Times of Frank O'Hara* (New York: Knopf, 1993), p. 205.

¹² Lytle Shaw, *Frank O'Hara: The Poetics of Coterie* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2006), p. 179.

wouldn't be out of character for O'Hara to have shown it around; while Kenneth Koch famously exclaimed, on sorting through O'Hara's papers after his death, 'Jesus, he'd written a lot that no one had ever seen', this is merely the flip-side of an assumption based on his familiar practice with other poems.¹³

If de Kooning didn't read his ode in typescript, there is a strong chance that he heard it at a reading at The Living Theater on 12 June 1959, organized to promote the approaching launch of *A New Folder*. According to a report on the event published in the then-fashionable *Mademoiselle* magazine, it was attended by 'poets [...], sixteen of them, and artists-in-sympathy, nineteen of these', an enumeration very likely to have included de Kooning.¹⁴ The painter is known to have been present at another reading at the same venue just three months earlier, scene of a famous contretemps between O'Hara and Jack Kerouac, and the June event had the added lure of featuring his own work¹⁵ — a photograph taken on the night shows the poet reading in front of a projection of de Kooning's *Itinerant Chapel* (1951), one of the drawings included in *A New Folder*.¹⁶ Additionally, while de Kooning did not produce *Itinerant Chapel* specifically for the anthology, he would likely have been involved in the process of signing it off for reproduction from the Janis Gallery, and thus, tangentially, in the production of the volume.

If, by some odd stroke of fate, de Kooning managed to avoid both seeing the poem in typescript and hearing it read aloud, he would have had ample opportunity to read it in print. *A New Folder*'s first print run, at Christmas 1959, consisted of 1000 copies, of which 150 were clothbound and numbered — seventy-two of these could comfortably have been reserved for contributors, while the anthology's 1960 paperback run put a further 850 copies into circulation.¹⁷ The 1961 print run of *Odes* and its companion volumes, which John Wilkinson refers to as *livres d'artistes*,¹⁸ was much smaller in scale, running to just 225 copies, and the resulting sets carried a

¹³ Gooch, p. 467.

¹⁴ 'The Folder Poets', *Mademoiselle*, January 1960, pp. 72–73. The account includes a group photograph of a number of the contributing poets, including O'Hara, taken at The Brasserie in Mies van der Rohe's newly finished Seagram Building.

¹⁵ Gooch, pp. 322–24.

¹⁶ *Homage to Frank O'Hara*, ed. by Bill Berkson and Joe LeSueur (Bollinas, CA: Big Sky, 1988), p. 71. A potentially valuable tape recording of O'Hara's reading was made by Daisy Aldan and is currently held at the Library of Congress.

¹⁷ Smith, p. 73–75.

¹⁸ John Wilkinson, "'Where Air is Flesh": The Odes of Frank O'Hara', in *Frank O'Hara Now: New Essays on the New York Poet*, ed. by Robert Hampson and Will Montgomery (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2010), pp. 103–19 (p. 106).

hefty price tag of three hundred dollars each, later increased to five hundred.¹⁹ Yet twenty-five of these sets were reserved, and David Kermani notes in his bibliography of John Ashbery that ‘in at least thirteen sets of the reserved copies (those for the artists, authors, publishers and several close friends), the numerals are followed by the printed phrase: “for [name]”’.²⁰ It is surely not beyond the realm of possibility that de Kooning, the subject of one of the poems, might also have been one of the ‘several close friends’ presented with a set.

The point of the above is not to demonstrate that de Kooning saw the poem at least once before 1963 — it seems overwhelmingly likely that he did. The intention is to show that he may have been exposed to it on a number of different occasions, publicly and privately, both written and read aloud, over a period of up to six years. There are also more general contextual factors to take into account. O’Hara’s literary engagement with painting is one of the most well-worn jumping-off points for critical consideration of his work, with pieces such as 1956’s ‘Why I Am Not a Painter’ — so popular that it was taken as the title for Mark Ford’s 2003 Carcanet selected edition — providing a convenient link between the ‘aesthetic courtier’ trope and the poetry itself. But the connection is practical, too: as Thomas Hess notes, de Kooning agreed to his first career retrospective at least partly ‘because his good friend the poet Frank O’Hara, who was a curator at the museum, was going to organize the New York show’.²¹ Less famous, but equally relevant here, is de Kooning’s reciprocal interest in poetry. Discussing the activities of the Club, a semi-formal artists’ discussion group founded by de Kooning and others in 1949, Gooch reports that ‘[de] Kooning was particularly enthusiastic about talks linking poetry and painting’,²² while Fielding Dawson, in *The Black Mountain Book*, provides a glimpse of his interest in Charles Olson.²³ Edvard Lieber even quotes an amusing riddle poem (‘Flowers grow out of your head’) written by de Kooning himself in 1952.²⁴ The more sustained the painter’s exposure to his friend’s work, and the more obvious his receptivity to poetry, the more Prynne’s theory of influence — conscious or unconscious — begins to make sense. While remaining alert to the possibility of falsification, and

¹⁹ Smith, p. 21.

²⁰ David Kermani, *John Ashbery: A Comprehensive Bibliography* (New York: Garland, 1977), pp. 11–12.

²¹ Thomas B. Hess, *Willem de Kooning* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1968), p. 11.

²² Gooch, p. 216.

²³ Fielding Dawson, *The Black Mountain Book*, 2nd edn (Rocky Mount, NC: North Carolina Wesleyan College Press, 1991), pp. 47–48.

²⁴ Edvard Lieber, *Willem de Kooning: Reflections in the Studio* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2000), p. 31.

especially to Prynne's use of the hypothesis as a rhetorical strategy in his lecture, it will now be necessary to discuss its theoretical implications in more detail, switching focus from the poem to the painting.

In 1963, the year of *Rosy-Fingered Dawn at Louse Point*'s composition, O'Hara and de Kooning narrowly missed becoming neighbours — the painting was completed early in the year, one of the last works to be produced at de Kooning's 831 Broadway studio before his momentous move to Long Island in March; barely a month later, O'Hara moved from 441 East 9th Street to a loft at 791 Broadway, two blocks up the street, where Elaine de Kooning had previously rented a studio (according to Gooch, the walls of O'Hara's new apartment boasted works by both husband and wife, though the two had by that point been separated for more than five years).²⁵ As Prynne points out, the painting shares its 80- by 70-inch format with a number of other works from this period — among them the chromatically related *Spike's Folly II* (1960), *Door to the River* (1960), *Pastorale* (1963) and a pair of untitled canvases (1961 and 1963) — a similarity which leads him to speculate that they may have been 'conceived of as a kind of sequence of developing suite-like exercises'.²⁶

Typical of conventional critical accounts of *Rosy-Fingered Dawn* is the explanatory plaque which accompanies the painting at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam. Though it makes brief reference to the status of 'rosy-fingered' as a Homeric epithet, describing it as 'a quotation from The Iliad', the text fails to develop this connection, slipping into a reductive biographical/geographical reading based on the second part of the title: 'For De Kooning, the light at the Louse Point dunes recalled the Dutch skies of his youth, and he captured the reflections in the water and movement of the wind with large gestural areas of color applied with light brushstrokes'. Even Jennifer Field, in her excellent chapter in the 2011 MoMA catalogue, bases her interpretation on location, calling up 'the diffused light of the coastal lowlands along the south shore of Long Island'.²⁷ While de Kooning has spoken eloquently of the influence of the Long Island environment on his work of this period, he has also sought to distance these paintings from

²⁵ Jennifer Field, 'Full Arm Sweep', in *De Kooning: A Retrospective*, ed. by John Elderfield (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2011), pp. 304–41 (p. 310). Gooch, p. 405–06.

²⁶ Prynne, p. 34. Due to its landscape format, *Pastorale* is technically 70 x 80.

²⁷ Field, p. 331.

any suspicion of simple landscape representation. Speaking to Harold Rosenberg in a well-known 1971 interview, he states explicitly that he was '[n]ot painting scenes from nature' before going on to emphasize the contingency of his palette, describing the colour-mixing process and using the word 'arbitrarily' three times in five sentences.²⁸ It would no doubt be instructive to compare the Stedelijk text to whatever plastic plaque sat next to *Spike's Folly II* when it went on display at the National Gallery of Art four years ago. Like *Spike's Folly I* (1959), which was first exhibited *sans titre* at the Janis Gallery's *9 American Painters* exhibition in 1960, this painting was titled post-purchase by collector Robert Scull, 'Spike' being his wife's nickname.²⁹

Perhaps not surprisingly, Prynne's reading of the phrase 'Rosy-Fingered Dawn at Louse Point' is more nuanced — it forms the core of his link between poem and painting, a connection which would be practically unthinkable without the title's insertion of familiar, literary semiosis. Prynne finds the title's counterpart ('In this dawn as in the first | it's the Homeric rose, its scent') in the second of the three sections of 'Ode to Willem de Kooning' — more specifically, in the second of that section's three stanzas, creating a kind of double centrality. While he is able to make broader claims about the painting, focusing particularly on its palette, he has ultimately to return to the title as the enabler of this interpretation. But where conventional accounts play up the connection between title and canvas, Prynne is at pains to stress their separation. He begins by describing the title as 'a kind of caprice, shewing [de Kooning's] humour and his delicacy in allusion and in the amusements of allusion'.³⁰ In stark contrast to his 2010 commentary on Shen Zhou's *Night Vigil*, which lauds 'the deepened apprehension enhanced by seeing through reading and reading through seeing', Prynne makes sure to emphasize, repeatedly, that the six crucial words are 'wittily appended to a canvas materially innocent of them'; later, he uses the reference to Long Island's Louse Point, with its evocation of the household insect, to describe the title as 'accidental and contingent, now immortalised like some crass parasite upon the form of an idealised body' (p. 40).³¹

Prynne does present a limited functional role for the title, but this does not depend on an intrinsic connection to the painting — he sees it, rather, as a sort of semiotic buffer to control any

²⁸ Harold Rosenberg, 'Interview with Willem de Kooning', in *Willem de Kooning: Works, Writings, Interviews*, ed. by Sally Yard (Barcelona: Ediciones Polígrafa), pp. 141–55 (pp. 151–52).

²⁹ Field, p. 340.

³⁰ Prynne, p. 39.

³¹ Prynne, 'The *Night Vigil* of Shen Zhou', *Glossator*, 3 (2010), pp. 1–18 (p. 9).

‘leakage of attention in the viewer’s gaze’ (p. 39). He describes the phrase ‘Rosy-Fingered Dawn at Louse Point’ as a perfect exemplar of this function, its elements of the high and the low (earlier, he calls ‘Rosy-Fingered’ a ‘low demotic joke’), the mythical and the contemporary-geographic, serving to cancel each other out, providing just enough sense to siphon off any troublesome allegorical interpretation, then destroying it, ‘leav[ing] the historical moment of divine epiphany vacant’ (p. 40). At first glance, Prynne’s interpretation of the title may seem like a denigration — the painting, as abstract central presence, is opposed to its label, a peripheral supplement which is only brought into play to reflect attention back on the centre. A reading of this relationship along Derridean lines could be profitable, particularly given Prynne’s repeated use of the terms ‘presence’ and ‘absence’ throughout the lecture.³² But what such a reading would ultimately reveal is the obverse of this apparently hierarchical structure: by cutting the title off from the painting’s central process of meaning-production, Prynne also affords it a certain aesthetic autonomy. The title becomes, in effect, a relatively isolated piece of poetic language — a micro-poem. At this point, I would like to introduce a specific critical perspective which may be helpful in understanding this newfound status, and in theorizing the relationship between the painting and ‘Ode to Willem de Kooning’.

Writing in the first chapter of his 1978 *Semiotics of Poetry*, the Franco-American critic and theorist Michael Riffaterre uses a set of imaginary painting titles as simple examples to demonstrate his idiosyncratic theory of poetic language.³³ For Riffaterre, every poem has a corresponding hypogram, a part-hypothetical piece of originary text which never appears directly in the work itself. The hypogram ‘compris[es] at least a predication, and it may be as large as a text’ — often it is a cliché or a quotation — and every sign in a poem refers back to its hypogram through a number of determinate processes.³⁴ To access this kernel, the critic must employ certain modes of reading, using tell-tale ‘ungrammaticalities’ in the text’s structure to jump what Riffaterre terms the ‘hurdle of mimesis’ towards a poem’s true ‘significance’. So, in the case of Alphonse Allais’s hypothetical painting ‘*Récolte de la tomate par des cardinaux apoplectiques au bord de la Mer Rouge*’ [Apoplectic cardinals picking tomatoes on the shores of the Red Sea], the

³² On p. 37, he even flirts with the phrase ‘metaphysics of presence’: ‘a kind of metaphysics, one might say, of almost spiritualised presence’.

³³ Michael Riffaterre, *Semiotics of Poetry* (Bloomington, IN and London: Indiana University Press, 1988), pp. 13–14.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 23.

ungrammaticality is the unexplained conjunction of a set of apparently unrelated images, which work together to refer to a single point: redness. Riffaterre does not give a specific hypogram in this case, but we might suggest something like the cliché ‘to see red’, which exists in French as *voir rouge*. A classicist by training, Riffaterre acknowledges his indebtedness to Ferdinand de Saussure’s notorious concept of the paragram — discussed by Prynne in the 1992 lecture series *Stars, Tigers and the Shape of Words* — but maintains a rigorous distinction between Saussure’s work and his own.³⁵ Importantly, he repeatedly compares the concealment of the hypogram — as well as its textual manifestation, the matrix — to repression, using the language of Freudian psychoanalytic theory to explain how it manifests itself in symptoms throughout the text.³⁶

Prynne’s interpretation of ‘Rosy-Fingered Dawn at Louse Point’ is structurally similar to Riffaterre’s reading of Allais’s title: a conjunction of separate elements creates something greater than — or, in Prynne’s model, less than — the sum of their parts. How, then, might a Riffaterrian reading of de Kooning’s title proceed? Helpfully, *Semiotics of Poetry* contains a specific discussion of poetic epithets, among them ‘rosy-fingered’. According to Riffaterre, epithets are not merely metrical conveniences — they also function as signs of ‘poeticity’ itself, establishing a text’s status as literary language. Riffaterre emphasizes the ability of these signs to call up specific historical and literary contexts: ‘the stock epithet presupposes a sentence or even a text already endowed with an ideological *ethos*’.³⁷ As well as signifying poeticity, ‘Rosy-Fingered Dawn’ raises the image of the Homeric world, with its complex systems of heroic ethics always hovering in the background. But what of the second part of de Kooning’s title, ‘at Louse Point’? Just like ‘Rosy-Fingered Dawn’, this phrase functions on two referential levels. On one, it signifies both a specific geographical feature in the East Hampton area, what Prynne terms ‘a raised landform touched against by adjacent water mass’ (p. 39), and a specific biographical feature of de Kooning’s life — this is the level on which most critics have chosen to read it. On a second level, however — and as a result of these more obvious associations — ‘Louse Point’ also refers metonymically *to the painter himself*, deliberately bringing him into the title. By 1963, de Kooning was a famous man — as Thomas Hess points out, he was presented with the Presidential Medal of

³⁵ Michael Riffaterre, *Text Production*, trans. by Terese Lyons (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), p. 75–77.

³⁶ Riffaterre, *Semiotics of Poetry*, p. 19; *Text Production*, p. 76.

³⁷ Riffaterre, *Semiotics of Poetry*, p. 30.

Freedom by Lyndon B. Johnson just one year later.³⁸ While *Rosy-Fingered Dawn* was produced in New York, work on the legendary Springs studio had begun in earnest in September 1962 following the provision of a \$50,000 bank loan, and de Kooning's daughter, Lisa, and lover, Joan Ward, had already moved to the area.³⁹ Through implicit reference to the studio, 'Louse Point' signifies de Kooning's subject-position as artist at the same time as it designates 41° 1' 16" N, 72° 8' 11" W.

In light of the reading given above, the Riffaterrian ungrammaticality in 'Rosy-Fingered Dawn at Louse Point' can be found in the contradiction between two deliberately invoked environments: ancient Greece and the then-contemporary United States — as Prynne points out, 'de Kooning's bracket of Homer with New York topography makes a secular bridge, joining the classical heroic and the new-world modern' (p. 40). What he fails to note is the hybrid referent implied by the conjunction of these signs' second-level meanings. 'Rosy-Fingered Dawn at Louse Point' first raises the Homeric world then brings in the figure of the artist — the combination serves to position de Kooning, standing at Louse Point, as the viewer of this essentially classical poetic scene. The combined significance may thus be given, following Riffaterre, as 'Willem de Kooning in an heroic context'. From this point, it is no great leap to suggest a very precise intertextual hypogram: O'Hara's 'Ode to Willem de Kooning'. As Riffaterre makes clear, a hypogram 'may be as large as a text', even a pre-existing poem, and the presentation of a heroic de Kooning figure is clearly one of O'Hara's primary aims in the ode.⁴⁰ The key reference point here is the generic positioning provided by the poem's title, but the tendency is present throughout the text. Near the end of the first section, O'Hara refers to de Kooning's paintings as 'flags' and 'banderillas', describing how 'they go up | on the enormous walls | as the brave must always ascend' (ll. 20–22). De Kooning and other painters are transformed into 'men | who lead us not forward or backward, but on as we must go on' (25–26), pseudo-military commanders bearing ensigns for an artistic vanguard. As Lytle Shaw points out, the poetic logic of the second section implies that 'De Kooning's heroic enactment of the dawn light conditions of Gotham and Sag Harbor have as their not-so-distant condition of possibility the dawn of the West', while the third section returns to the painter's individual characteristics, his 'imperishable courage and the gentle

³⁸ Hess, p. 101.

³⁹ Field, p. 310.

⁴⁰ Riffaterre, *Semiotics of Poetry*, p. 23.

will | which is the individual dawn of genius rising from its bed' (ll. 81–82).⁴¹ These lines, in turn, throw a link back to beginning of the poem, where O'Hara strives towards 'greatness | which is available to me | through generosity and lavishness of spirit, yours' (7–10), creating a circular system of laudation.

It is this circle which de Kooning's 'capricious' title serves, not necessarily consciously, to break. Classically bathetic, 'Rosy-Fingered Dawn at Louse Point' inflates its hypogram, the heroic painterly image, to the point of rupture — poetry becomes a joke and we are returned, as in Prynne's earlier reading, to the fact of the painting itself. But it would be foolish to take this over-inflation as a possibility which the sophisticated and attentive O'Hara has simply failed to anticipate. John Wilkinson argues convincingly that the image of ll. 66–67, in which 'the Promethean act amounts to little more than striking a match', provides the crucial injection of bathos, bringing de Kooning back down to earth before allowing him to reascend, at least partially, in the poem's concluding stages.⁴² Lytle Shaw's reading, however, throws up another possibility. As mentioned at the beginning of this essay, one of the paintings to which reference in 'Ode to Willem de Kooning' is practically undisputed is *Easter Monday*. Completed in 1956, the year before the poem's composition, the work is notable for showcasing de Kooning's well-known — though reportedly accidental — newsprint technique, in which pieces of newspaper, originally laid over the canvas to keep the paint wet, transfer their text and images to the final work. The most striking of these transfers is a sideways image of Richard Burton as Alexander the Great in the eponymous 1956 film, 'rushing into battle with his spear and shield'.⁴³ It is difficult to think of a more perfectly bathetic picture than this, high art shot through with the sort of ridiculous movie theatre heroics that Roland Barthes would definitively puncture just one year later — writing in 'The Romans in Film', Barthes describes the Hollywood depiction of classical antiquity as 'a degraded spectacle, which is equally afraid of simple reality and of total artifice'.⁴⁴ O'Hara refers to the image directly in 1961's 'Favorite Painting in the Metropolitan', where 'Richard Burton | waves through de Kooning',⁴⁵ but Shaw also detects references in the 'fluttering newspapers' and 'Athenian contradictions' (ll. 76–77) of 'Ode to Willem de Kooning'. Even without a concrete link

⁴¹ Shaw, p. 182.

⁴² Wilkinson, p. 109.

⁴³ Shaw, p. 184.

⁴⁴ Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. by Annette Lavers (London: Jonathan Cape, 1972), p. 26.

⁴⁵ O'Hara, 'Favorite Painting in the Metropolitan', in Allen, pp. 423–424.

to the image, the presence of *Easter Monday* in the initial section is enough to ensure that Burton's mock-heroic spectre quietly haunts the remainder of the poem, providing a note of irony which, while not always active, certainly keeps O'Hara from slipping into any sort of unconditional, wide-eyed worship.

The theory briefly traced out above — that the title 'Rosy-Fingered Dawn at Louse Point' provides a route through which O'Hara's poem can be read back into de Kooning's painting — has its limits. Despite claiming confidently that his model is 'applicable [...] to all Western literature',⁴⁶ and even given his use of hypothetical painting titles as examples, Riffaterre would likely balk at any quick-and-easy extension of the system into visual art, and there is certainly an element of perversity in reading Prynne alongside such an emphatically unreconstructed structuralist. Writing in a 1972 letter to Douglas Oliver (which, incidentally, mentions O'Hara), Prynne refers to 'the reductive fantasies of the structuralists', later using '*Tel Quel*' as a term of blanket dismissal.⁴⁷ Nevertheless, it is important, in cases of purported artistic and poetic influence, not to stop at the stage of the 'tempting connection', but to push on in an attempt to uncover its practical manifestations.

When Jackson Pollock made a temporary shift towards numbering in the late '40s, the move was figured explicitly — at least by his wife, Lee Krasner — as a striving after some idealized neutrality or purity: 'Jackson used to give his pictures conventional titles [...] but now he simply numbers them. Numbers are neutral. They make people look at a picture for what it is — pure painting'.⁴⁸ Thankfully, de Kooning seems never to have succumbed to such a naive conception of the title, and proper attention to his use of words may serve as a gateway to other aspects of his artistic practice. Harold Rosenberg, arguably the chief architect of the de Kooning mythos,⁴⁹ remarked that '[a] contemporary painting or sculpture is a species of centaur — half art materials, half words',⁵⁰ and the painter himself famously affirmed that 'Nothing is positive about art except that it is a word'.⁵¹ I do not claim, like Sam Ladkin in his illuminating paper on de

⁴⁶ Riffaterre, *Semiotics of Poetry*, p. ix.

⁴⁷ Prynne, 'From a Letter to Douglas Oliver', *Grosseteste Review*, 6 (1973), pp. 152–54 (p. 154).

⁴⁸ Berton Roueché, 'Unframed Space', *New Yorker*, 5 August 1950, p. 16.

⁴⁹ Lee Hall, *Elaine and Bill: Portrait of a Marriage* (New York: HarperCollins, 1993), pp. 117–24.

⁵⁰ Rosenberg, *The De-Definition of Art: Action Art to Pop to Earthworks* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1972), p. 55.

⁵¹ Willem de Kooning, 'What Abstract Art Means to Me [1951]', in *Manifesto: A Century of Isms*, ed. by Mary Ann

Kooning and Clark Coolidge, to have provided a mode of comparison which may be taken as ‘paradigmatic of strategies of interdisciplinary reading generally’, but I do hope to have offered an example of how an apparently unrelated critical perspective may breathe new life into stale conjecture.⁵² While de Kooning’s painting and O’Hara’s poem represent a network of interrelation and interdependence far too complex to be exhausted in the course of a single essay, this piece will have succeeded if it gives a sense, however basic, of the obscure form of reverse *ekphrasis* which carries meaning from poem to painting, the ‘Whitmanesque dawn ending [O’Hara’s] ode in another beginning’.⁵³

Caws (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press), pp. 264–68 (p. 264).

⁵² Sam Ladkin, ‘Glancing paintings and poems: figuration and abstraction in Clark Coolidge’s *Polaroid* and Willem de Kooning’s *Excavation*’, *Textual Practice*, 26 (2012), pp. 421–48 (p. 421).

⁵³ Wilkinson, p. 105.

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